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**FundRaising Success**

**Easier Said Than Done: Death by Committee**

**Groupthink is the kiss of death to successful fundraising.**

June 2007 By Jeff Brooks

Whoever said a camel is a horse designed by a committee gave committees too much credit.  
  
If a committee tried to design a horse, it wouldn’t end up with a strong, useful, if inelegant, animal. It would produce a mound of tin cans and fish skeletons.   
  
That’s what committees do: They change clarity into confusion and quality into crap.  
  
In fundraising, the committee that really screws things up is the one that reviews fundraising materials.   
  
Committees are meant to bring together expertise. What they actually do is pool incompetence. In the looking-glass world of committees, each member’s incompetence gets full hearing:

* There’s always someone who says, “Too much copy. No one will read it.”
* There’s always a smart person who says, “Too emotional. People won’t respond. Make it more intellectual.”
* Then there’s an educated person who says, “You’re talking down to the donors. They’ll be insulted.”
* There’s at least one “formalizer.” You know the type: short words like “gift” become long words like “donation,” and colloquial words like “kids” become formal words like “children.” And you can’t start a sentence with a conjunction. Or use sentence fragments. Ever.
* There’s usually a brand cop with a straitjacket interpretation of brand standards.
* Then there’s someone who’s afraid of change.
* And someone else who’s allergic to anything that’s been done before.
* Have I mentioned lawyers? If you have one of those on the committee — well, let’s just start singing your project’s requiem right now.

If all that weren’t enough, there’s a group dynamic in many committees: To prove you’re intelligent, relevant or on top of things, you have to have opinions. Lots of them. But in an atmosphere where personal opinion pulls as much weight as facts or expertise, more opinions are a very bad thing.  
  
It’s OK to have a blind spot or two. But the fundraising review committee mixes everyone’s poorly supported opinions into a toxic cocktail that can kill your chances for fundraising success.  
  
And if it’s hard on quality, it’s death to innovation. The less familiar something is, the more a committee attacks. Fear of the unknown grows into “Lord of the Flies” groupthink; and you can kiss innovation goodbye.  
  
The weird thing is, nearly everyone knows that a committee is a terrible way to produce good work. Yet they live on, doing damage every day.   
  
**How can we make it better?**With a generational change about to sweep in a new crop of more demanding donors, you’ll need exceptional work and box-busting innovation.  
  
If you have the power to do so, ban the fundraising review committee. Replace it with two or three people who have specific and relevant expertise. Limit their authority to their areas of competence. And make sure these same people are held responsible for fundraising results. That will keep them focused and realistic.  
  
But if you don’t have that power and are yourself just another face on the committee, you *can* make things better. You could resign from the committee. On a raw numbers basis, that might be good. But I have a feeling your committee would be even worse off without you.  
  
Instead of giving up, try these three things:

1. **Limit your comments.** Hold your tongue and suggest changes only when you are squarely within your expertise and you have facts to back you up.
2. **Work to enlighten fellow committee members.** Bring in documentation from the experts. Build the case for fact-based judgment over opinion-based judgment.
3. **Advocate restraint.** You might be able to impact your committee’s culture and make it less destructive. Your fellow members likely are open to becoming a different kind of group for the good of your organization.

I know: That’s all much easier said than done. As long as the committee exists, it will behave as a committee. But the fundraising world needs fast, strong and intelligent horses as we face the challenges ahead. The committee as we know it isn’t going to give us that.  
  
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